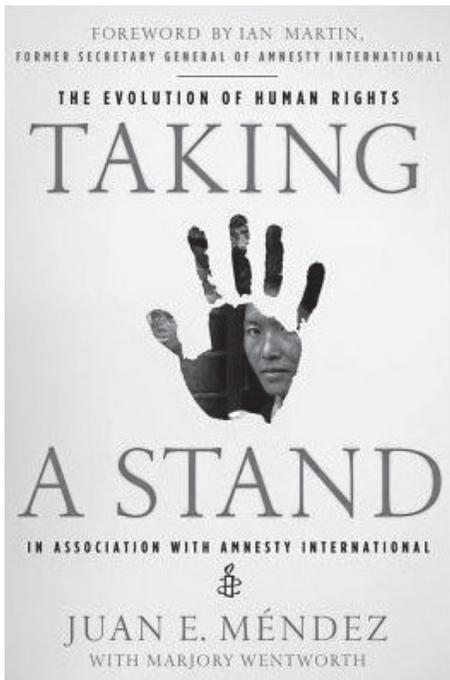


BOOK REVIEW



JUAN E. MÉNDEZ WITH MARJORY WENTWORTH, TAKING A STAND: THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (PALGRAVE MACMILLIAN, 2011)

Over the past forty years, communities and individuals have suffered instances of unfathomable evil—calculated, heinous crimes dealt upon the innocent at the hands of their own state or another, state-sponsored instrumentalities, or ruthless opposition forces. The world has played witness to cases of arbitrary detention and torture, forced disappearances, forced displacement, forced labor, gender- and sexual-based violence, war crimes, and all-too-successful campaigns of persecution and genocide.

Yet embedded throughout this global narrative are poignant and truly inspirational examples of personal sacrifice and triumph in the face of evil, of those who rose as defenders of humanity, tireless advocates of truth and justice, and ardent voices for the world's collective conscience. While at too many points, their voices grew hoarse falling upon others who refused to listen, these men and women, through strength of conviction and force of intellect, laid the foundation

for what all of us (good and evil) now embrace (or fear!) as the movement for human rights.

There is one individual in particular who, as a Professor at American University Washington College of Law (WCL) and as an indispensable supporter of the *Brief*, has inspired me to become a part of the movement he helped create. That individual is Juan E. Méndez, who with Marjory Wentworth is the author of *Taking a Stand: The Evolution of Human Rights*, a story about his contributions and a collection of his insights.

As law students with our entire careers ahead of us, my peers and I have affectionately used such adjectives as “daunting” or “intimidating” when attempting to capture Professor Méndez’s extraordinary list of accomplishments, any one of which represents a pinnacle in the field. Alongside his duties at WCL—which routinely includes teaching one or two courses per semester—Professor Méndez is currently serving as United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Professor Méndez contributed substantially to *Human Rights Watch* during its critical and pioneering formative years, eventually rising to the position of general counsel. During this time, Professor Méndez and a colleague founded the Center for Justice and International Law, dedicated to litigation before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In this capacity, and later as a Commissioner at the IACHR, Professor Méndez helped successfully litigate many of the groundbreaking cases that students of human rights come to know as staples of human rights curriculum. Professor Méndez later served as President of the International Center for Transitional Justice, which during his tenure grew from 31 permanent staff members to 140 and from an annual budget of \$6 million to \$22 million. In 2004, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan named Professor Méndez to the post of Special

Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide. He was the first to occupy the newly created position.

Alongside these accomplishments, what perhaps makes Professor Méndez’s story most unique is that he is more than a defender of human rights. He is also a survivor of state-engineered intimidation, arbitrary detention, and torture. Born and raised in Argentina, Professor Méndez was a young lawyer, husband, and father, passionate about utilizing the law to fight injustice, support the poor and disenfranchised, and defend political prisoners. When Argentina descended into the era of state-sponsored terrorism known as the *Dirty War*, Professor Méndez continued his work despite serious and increasingly bold threats to him, his family, his friends, and his colleagues. In August 1975, Professor Méndez was arrested and detained without charges for nearly two years, during which he was subjected to harsh conditions, solitary confinement, and torture. With his family reaching safety in Brazil, Professor Méndez was eventually released and permitted to go into exile, thanks largely to the sustained efforts of friends, colleagues, and family on the outside. Many close to Professor Méndez were not as fortunate, and became caught in what he calls the “machinery of death.”

What the machinery’s engineers likely did not anticipate is that, despite their suffering, Professor Méndez and others emerged stronger, with lucid vision and a burning desire to bring truth and justice for victims in Argentina and, in time, for victims around the world. Suffering from internal dissent and international isolation, the junta government in Argentina had collapsed by late 1983. Professor Méndez and his colleagues worked in the years that followed to ensure the successful prosecution of its leadership. He credits his experience as a prisoner to the junta as the motivation behind the victim-centered approach to his work.

It becomes so incredibly clear, after reading *Taking a Stand*, that Professor Méndez has proven vital in creating,

nourishing, developing, and at times singularly driving the movement for human rights. He is always quick to defer praise to those who have served alongside him, and undoubtedly the movement is a collective one that has benefitted in countless ways from the selfless efforts and courageous sacrifices of Professor Méndez's friends and colleagues. Yet, one simply cannot separate the movement's narrative from the life and work of Juan Méndez. It is not surprising, therefore, that Professor Méndez personifies what the human rights movement is, at its core, intended to represent: accountability and responsibility, respect for others, the diligent pursuit of progress, and a deep attention to the growth of future generations.

Grounded in harrowing personal experience and guided by the relentless

pursuit for social justice, few accounts are as galvanizing, and as encouraging of a career in human rights, as that of Professor Méndez. In *Taking a Stand*, Professor Méndez weaves his tale with characteristic humility and brutal honesty. Yet, uniquely, he does so according to a sequence of themes, with each chapter flowing from a one-word title: detention, torture, disappearances, immigration, solidarity, law, war, accountability, justice, and genocide. On each theme, Professor Méndez uses his experience to reflect on the present state of human rights, its successes and obstacles, lessons for the future. He is also vocal in his frustration with the government of his adopted country, the United States, which, he writes, cannot be considered a partner to the human rights movement as long as it continues to ignore its own past and ongoing violations.

In many ways, the manner in which Professor Méndez delivers his important message reflects his dual role as both a teacher to young students and a celebrated expert. *Taking A Stand* is at once a guidebook for the emerging generation of human rights advocates and a resource for the movement's most decorated leaders when, amidst complex deliberations, they stand to benefit from Professor Méndez's impeccable clarity.

Christopher Tansey, a J.D. candidate at the American University School of Law and Co-Editor in Chief of the Human Rights Brief, reviewed Taking a Stand: The Evolution of Human Rights for the Human Rights Brief.